THE DEADENING INFLUENCE OF CHARITABLE INSTITUTIONS

V. Everit Macy, Westchester's Millionaire Superintendent of the Poor, Points Out the Dangers of Committing Boys and Girls to Public Institutions—Seeks Cause of Poverty

IN a cramped, inadequate office of what is called the administration building of the Westchester county almshouse a grave, smooth faced man of forty-three is rapidly dictating to his secretary, examining charts, tabulating results. From time to time he is interrupted by a telephone summons, by a call from some assistant; he decides quickly, answers questions without hesitation, and again turns to the work with which he is engaged so intently.

Scores of inmates have to sleep in hallways.

If you should ask the paupers at Eastview who this man is you would probably be told that he is "some politician with punch enough to land one of the fattest jobs in the county." The paupers at Eastview haven't the slightest idea that the county superintendent of the poor, elected last fall, is a rich man, a director in banks and great commercial corporations, that for many years he has been engaged in philanthropic and educational undertakings, and that there on the Westchester county poor farm, at Eastview, he is conducting investigations which may have important consequences for society at large. Yet such are facts. The task V. Everit Macy has undertaken is not merely that of conducting the almshouse on approved methods, but it includes a scientific study of the causes of poverty itself.

Few men are better equipped for the work now under way at Eastview. Mr. Macy inherited sufficient wealth to enable him to devote his time and strength to public service without thinking of returns in money; and this he has been doing ever since he was graduated from the Columbia School of Architecture in 1893. In order to look after investments with which he was entrusted he has served as director on many boards, including those of the Mechanics and Metals National Bank, the Bank of Long Island, Union Trust Company, Seaman's Savings Bank, Queens Borough Gas and Electric Company, &c.

In addition to these financial and commercial enterprises he has been treasurer and director of the City Club, director of the Provident Loan Society, member of the central city committee of the Citizens' Union in 1898-99, member of the independent State committee in 1898, trustee of Teachers College, of the University Settlement Society, of the council of the Syrian Protestant College, the George Junior Republic, the School of Applied Agriculture and Horticulture, treasurer of the People's Institute, member of the executive committee of the National Civic Federation. His clubs include the Century, Association, Reform, University, St. Anthony, Riding Club and, of course, the City Club.

Mr. Macy still retains membership in his clubs and most of his business connections. But in order to give his time and attention to the work of conducting the almhouse at Eastview and of making a scientific study of the causes of poverty he has relinquished active part in most of the philanthropic, educational and charitable agencies. He still is a trustee of Teachers College and treasurer of the national child labor committee; but when he assumed office at Eastview on January 1 of the present year he resigned from the boards of twenty-three organizations for human uplift and advancement.

When he took charge of the almshouse he found it on a farm of about 125 acres, lying low surrounded by high hills and rolling country. Situated near the State road were two buildings, comparatively modern; one a general hospital, the other a tuberculosis hospital. A hundred feet distant stretched out a row of irregular, old fashioned buildings, erected at various times, built close together, and as a whole constituting a conglomerate mass of patches which for ugliness, cramped quarters and generally unsanitary conditions it would be difficult to duplicate.

The administration building, as it is somewhat grandiloquently called, was erected eighty or a hundred years ago. It contains offices, a gloomy reception room for visitors and a dining room for the staff. This staff, as Mr. Macy soon ascertained, consisted of a keeper, a farmer, a housekeeper, two assistant matrons, eleven nurses, a cook and two inmate cooks, besides a clerk, who kept the records made obligatory by law and performed a variety of other services.

Upstairs in the administration building, up a flight of wooden stairs, be it noted, are the quarters for the keeper, two matrons and five nurses. Up a second flight of wooden stairs Mr. Macy found sleeping quarters for some fifty men in long, narrow rooms under a sloping roof, lighted by a few dormer windows. Entrance to these rooms was obtained through narrow doors.

In the next oldest building, standing well close to this one, were other wooden stairways leading to dormitories for women. Rows and rows of white cot beds nearly made up filled the rooms and overflowed into the hallways. Down on the ground floor was a large sitting room, filled at all hours of the day by women, who chat there and sew, or read old newspapers and magazines; and beyond this are dark, narrow corridors, also filled with beds.

A short flight of steps leads to the women's dining room, dark, gloomy, forbidding. Another flight leads to the kitchen, as it is called. In reality it consists of space otherwise unused, in an angle of the low basement. At one side stands a single range, just large enough for three huge copper caldrons.

The home of six hundred paupers at Eastview.

"These are the only cooking facilities we have, for 500 inmates," Mr. Macy explained the other day, when showing a visitor over the institution. "You see we cannot give the people much variety in diet when we have nothing but these three kettles to cook their food in."

Still beyond this are other two story buildings, all of heavy masonry, none of modern construction. Without exception they seem to be dark, unsanitary, wholly inadequate for their purpose. Everywhere is unprotected woodwork.

"What would happen," Mr. Macy was asked, "if a fire should break out?"

"That," he said gravely, "is the one thing I most dread, every hour of every night. You have seen what a tinder box this whole place is? Well, keep in mind, please, that including the kitchen range, we have here in cold weather just twenty-three separate fires going in twenty-three heating plants. Also remember that many of the inmates are so old and feeble that they could not possibly help themselves in time of need.

"Many are crippled; almost all of them are infirm. When I accepted the office of superintendent of the poor it was with the distinct condition that under no circumstances would I be responsible for loss of life in case a fire should break out here. If it ever does break out——" He stopped short. The probable consequences were too serious to discuss.

For several months after Mr. Macy went to Eastview he found it impossible to secure the services of competent internes in the hospital, so the visiting physician was compelled to do all the work. Through personal effort the superintendent now has a staff which includes a resident physician and several specialists—gynecologist, obstetrician, surgical practitioners, an eye man and one of the best dentists in New York, who spends half a day each week caring for the teeth of the paupers. These men, nearly all of them eminent in their profession, are giving their time and services because they are public spirited.

Furthermore, Mr. Macy now employs stenographers, not provided by the county, and pays them out of his own pocket, and he has otherwise strengthened his working force because a few men and women who know what he is doing have gladly sent private subscriptions in order to further the work. At present Mr. Macy is completing plans for persuading the people of Westchester county to give authority for selling the present poor farm and purchasing another and larger farm, to be equipped with safe modern buildings.

One thing that surprised Mr. Macy when he first went to Eastview was the fact that no physical examination was given to applicants for admittance.

"They were simply taken in and assigned places to sleep and eat," he said. "If one of them was so ill as to attract attention, attention was given. But it is a fact that there was no physical examination made to show whether or not this woman or that man who came here was suffering from some disease, contagious, infectious, or other. At present every applicant on arriving is thoroughly examined by a medical man. I am told that this is one of the few almshouses, if not the only one, in the United States where such precaution is taken."

The number of inmates at Eastview runs from about 425 in summer to nearly 600 in winter. Of these one-fifth are women and four-fifths are men, which seems to indicate greater thrift among women with slender resources than among men correspondingly situated. Furthermore, almost all of the women are willing to do whatever tasks they are asked to perform; but the men, with few exceptions, try to evade work of any kind. Their attitude is illustrated by one who was sent there by a local overseer in a nearby township. This man was requested to do some light task, and refused point blank.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't do it," Mr. Macy's assistant explained. "It is easy work, and will save hiring an outside man to do it."

"That's it!" sneered the pauper. "Think you're going to save money by gettin' me to work for nothing, do you? Well, I'll just have you remember that the taxpayers of the township I come from are already paying you folks plenty to support me; and I'll be hanged if I add anything to it by working for nothing."

This is not the only instance on record in which a pauper had the nerve to speak out so plainly; and it is said that his represents the average mental attitude taken quietly by many others. This reluctance to work should not be criticised too harshly, for it is believed to be due largely to physical debility. With the medical staff reorganized, a careful examination of every inmate has been undertaken, and up to this time not one sound, healthy man or women has been found in the county house. Most of the ailments have been brought on by excessive use of alcohol.

With only a few months of preparatory study, Mr. Macy is not inclined to discuss results thus far achieved in the scientific study of the causes of poverty.

"It is far too early as yet to say anything definite," he replied when questioned on the subject. "We find one superficial cause and another, but beyond them in all probability lie deeper causes.

"For instance, I might say in a general way that 90 per cent. of the men who come here as inmates come as the result of alcoholic indulgence. But that is not enough. It is up to us, if possible, to find out whether habitual drunkenness and its accompanying poverty is a result of abnormal mental condition, physical disability, miserable environment, general despair, or whether drunkenness itself causes such things. You see, it is a large question and intricate, for which reason we prefer to go slowly and carefully before making any public announcement.

"There are, however, a few things that may be said. The records of past years at Eastview are by no means adequate for our purpose, but thus far the newly designed charts we have been able to fill out show that more men are admitted as paupers at the age of 44 years than at any other period. This indicates a serious situation, provided it exists generally in other institutions of like nature; for it means that these men are down and out at the very time when they should be at the height of their powers, working hard, laying by money, bringing up families and exercising full rights of citizenship.

"For women there are two epochs of life when more are admitted than at any other. One is the age of 20 and the other is the age of 60. I wish to call special attention to this because it has important bearing, not alone on the people of Westchester county, but on the people of the entire State of New York. I refer to the feeble minded, who are not so erratic that continuous restraint and supervision seem necessary, yet who constitute a real and grave danger to society as a whole; perhaps the single most perilous problem we have now to solve.

"Let us take definite instances, if you please, and reason from them. Let us take the case of a young woman sufficiently intelligent to do light housework in a home where the housekeeper is not exacting, and yet lacking balance, so that she is unable to protect herself. Four such women under 22 years of age are now here for confinement, and they each had a child last year under the same conditions. One came back only the other day who is the mother of eight children, and I have in mind still another who is the mother of nine children.

"Remember, please, I do not charge that all of such children are illegitimate, for I do not know that to be the case. But one thing may be taken for granted—sooner or later those unfortunate children, or the great majority of them, will find their way into almshouses, asylums, jails, insane asylums or other public institutions. It is not difficult to see what this means to society as a whole, as well as to the children themselves.

"Now, let us go a step still further. There are in the State of New York certain institutions which care for the epileptic and feeble minded to the number of approximately 4,000 or 5,000 individuals, and 4,000 more are in almshouses and jails. But in the State are some 23,000 others—of whom 10,000 are women of child bearing age—who are not being properly cared for by the State; who are not being looked after, shielded, guarded from harm; and that is where the serious part of the situation comes in, for it is well known that women of this class give birth to children at a vastly greater ratio than do mothers who are normal mentally and physically.

"Twenty years from now the number of feeble minded in New York State may be 100,000 or even more, if measures are not taken promptly to care for those now of productive age, and those who are fast reaching such age. I speak in some detail of this because I regard it as a disease of the social fabric which must be checked and eradicated unless the people of this Commonwealth are willing to assume heavy responsibility in future.

"Think of the probable suffering of the children brought into the world under such conditions. What is their future? Are we not responsible?"

Mr. Macy spoke of one other matter of general interest to New Yorkers—the care of dependent children.

"Westchester county, as you know," he said, "is the largest in the State excepting those in New York city, and the county of Erie, which includes the city of Buffalo. Yet our laws for this great, thriving, populous county, with its manifold and diversified industries, are the same laws which govern little Schoharie, or any other county tucked far back in the State. The laws were enacted a century or so ago, and while they applied perhaps to conditions then existing, they certainly do not apply under modern conditions as we find them in Westchester county.

"Scattered through the cities like Yonkers and Mount Vernon, through the outlying farming communities, through a multitude of tiny villages, and larger ones like Peekskill, Tarrytown, Pleasantville and Ossining, we have in Westchester county 120 persons with power to commit children to institutions. These persons include magistrates in the cities, justices of the peace and local overseers of the poor in each township. Now it can be readily understood that a man elected as overseer or as justice frequently holds office for a couple of years and then goes back to private life. But some of the things which may happen as a result of this are not so readily seen at first glance.

"When one of these committing officers sends a person to me with proper attesting paper I am compelled to receive him or her, and give the care which the county laws provide for. I have no voice in the matter. To be sure, as superintendent of the poor I have authority to send inmates away when in my judgment they should be sent; but I have to receive them whether or no. Not long ago a protest was made to a certain committing officer who intended to send three children to institutions—children who, in our judgment, could have been taken care of by relatives; and the officer said: 'Well, I want to send them just the same. I've been to the trouble of hearing the application and making out the papers, and if I don't send them I'll lose my 75 cent fees.'

"I do not think that this penurious spirit is widely prevalent," Mr. Macy continued, "although it crops up now and then, as in the case of another man to whom a poor family applied for free milk. They asked for one quart a day for each of twelve days, to last during an illness or some other trouble. So he made out twelve separate orders each calling for one quart of milk, and each bearing a separate date.

"The milk cost the county 9 cents a quart. The overseer who ordered it is entitled by law to charge $2 a day for each day he works. So he calmly sent in a bill for twelve quarts of milk at 9 cents, and twelve days services for himself at $2 each. In other words, under that arrangement, taxpayers would be paying $2.09 a quart for milk—$25.08 for the twelve quarts.

"Now the 120 persons authorized to commit these children to institutions, or the forty overseers who commit adults to the almshouse, are apparently responsible to nobody; that is, they have not reported to anybody until recently. That is unfortunate enough, but still more unfortunate is the case of dependent children.

"Here at Eastview we receive babies up to 2 years, with their mothers, but we do not care for children under the age of 16. Those between 2 years and 16 are sent by the local committing officer directly from the community they live in to some of the forty or more institutions, where they are taken in a large number of children being sent thus to institutions in New York city.

"There they go, with properly made out papers signed by some one of the 120 committing officers, many of whom never took the trouble to notify the superintendent of the poor here at Eastview. And in certain cases he only learned that such children had been committed when he received a bill for maintaining them in this institution or that; and he paid the bill, as he was compelled to under the archaic law which still obtains.

"To maintain each child in such an institution costs the county $150 per year. At the present time more than 300 children of this county are being so committed each year."

"How long do they stay in the institutions?"

"That can only be answered in a general way," Mr. Macy replied. "We have tried to keep track of the children since I took hold here on January 1 and 126 discharged since then averaged two years in the institutions."

"You say that some 300 are now being committed every year?" Mr. Macy nodded assent and the visitor went on: "How many are now, at this present time, in all of these forty or more institutions?"

"It is impossible to say definitely. As far as we have been able to trace them however, it appears that about 800 boys and girls are being thus cared for at the expense of Westchester county."

"What happens to those poor little dependents when they are discharged from the institution?"

"Sometimes charitable or philanthropic agencies," said Mr. Macy; "sometimes relatives or friends take them out. In other cases they may have to shift for themselves as best they can. I don't know. I suppose the institutions know. But one thing I am convinced of. If a decent home, even the most simple, can be found, a child of normal health should not be committed to a public institution.

"In those homes, or asylums, or orphanages, no matter how admirably conducted, no matter how much tenderness and sympathy is shown, the little inmate is in great danger of growing up deprived of the power of initiative and especially of judgment. Everything is done for him by routine. He is given certain food to eat, and eats it without thinking whether it is what he wants and needs. He is provided with certain articles of clothing, in some cases exactly like those worn by hundreds of other children all around him. He has no choice in selection. He is given certain duties to perform and does them.

"In no way is he allowed to exercise personal preference or to develop the ability to judge of this or that. When boys or girls, brought up under such routine, emerge into the world at the age of 16 or a little over, they are under a handicap so heavy that it holds them back in their journey all through life.

"Self-control they may learn in some of the best institutions, but of next importance to this is sound judgment in matters of everyday, common experience. This they do not develop, and cannot, where they live by strict routine, where everything they have is provided for them on a basis of uniformity, where they have no voice in what they shall eat, wear or do; and where they never know the freedom of life to be found in a private household.

"I do not for one moment wish to criticise the noble men and women by self-sacrifice and often by private means have established and maintained charitable institutions which have cared for so many thousand helpless children, but when an institution is caring for from 500 to 2,500 children, it is difficult to see how much character or initiative can be allowed each child. And I do wish to emphasize my belief that the institution does not and cannot take the place of a good home, no matter how humble, how plainly furnished, how simple the life therein."

Aged inmates sunning themselves on porch.

V. Everit Macy, millionaire superintendent of the poor.

THE ILLUMINATED FLYING FISH

"GUESS you never heard tell of Jim Borden's illuminated flying fish, did ye?" remarked old Zeb Cleary of the Raunt, Jamaica Bay, as he pushed the tobacco deeper in the bowl of his pipe and deftly applied a flaming match. "Jim ain't around here any more. I reckon he's fishing somewhere in the happy fishing grounds—some place where they ketch fish in all kinds o' tides an' blows.

"But when Jim was here, believe me, boy, he kept things a-hummin'.

"Almost everybody from Inwood to Rockaway Point knew Jim some time or another. He used to live in a boat off Ruffle Bar, in one of them schooners that for years looked as if every minnit would be her last. But she hung on long after Jim lit out.

"Jim was the best fisherman, the darndest liar and the best jokester Jamaica Bay ever knew, an that's going some. Jim could think up and carry out more darn fool ideas and pranks than any six men that ever bucked the tides hereabouts.

"Jim used to have a tame seagull that was smarter than any trick monkey that ever capered about in a circus. It was black as ink. Jim caught it when it was a baby and he raised it partly on his boat and party on Ruffle Bar.

"One evening just as the weakfish were beginning to bite in late May Jim came up to the Raunt and after having his favorite tipple begin to talk mysteriously about an illuminated flying fish. Said he'd seen one several times during the past few days.

"'Diculous; there ain't no sech thing,' said old Pop Hesselbach. 'Who ever heerd tell o' a illuminated flying fish. You're drunk or crazy, Jim.'

"Jim jest smiled. Then he snorted:

"'There is illuminated flying fish. Ain't I seen one down around Ruffle Bar at least four times this past week? I reckon I know what I'm talking about, gosh dern it.'

"'Change yer booze, Jim,' said Tom Quibbs, who was sittin' around kinder lonesome fer a drink.

"'Not on your life; I'm right, all right. I seen a illuminated fish sure enough.'

"'Bet ye $20 there ain't no sech thing as a illuminated fish—a fish that flies through the air,' excitedly yelled Pop Hesselbach, jumping to his feet.

"'Reckon I'll have to go yeh, Pop,' said Jim, pulling his wallet from his weskit and taking a yallerback from it. 'I'll bet yer there is sech a thing as a illuminated flying fish, and, what's more, I'll bet ye we see it to-night.'

"'Done,' yelled Pop, throwing two $10 bills on the table.

"'Gee,' said Tom Quibbs, 'I didn't think there was so much money anywhere in Long Island.'

"'I'll kiver,' said Jim, laying his two tens on Pop's.

"'How'll ye prove it?' asked Pop suddenly.

"'We'll go down to Ruffle Bar now and watch. If that illuminated flying fish don't show up by 10 o'clock I lose.'

"Well at nearly 9 the hull party, myself included, were anchored off Ruffle Bar. Jim had gone ahead, saying he wanted to see if everything was all right aboard his schooner. He had joined us and was sitting on the deck smoking.

"The tide was runnin' in and a light breeze blowin'. There weren't any stars; it was very dark; 'peared more or less like rain.

"Suddenly Pop in a scared voice whispered:

"'Lor', what's thet?'

"'By hickory, it's the illuminated flying fish,' said Tom Quibbs.

"'Yep,' said Jim.

Out of the black of the night behind Jim's boat there appeared the illuminated shape of a fish, a weakfish as we could distinctly see; not a large one; maybe a schoolfish of a pound, but a weakfish jest the same. Its eyes rolled and blazed; its fins and tail moved jest as if it were swimming!

"'Holy mackerel, it's the ghost of a fish,' tremblingly said Pop.

"Slowly the fish rose in the air; then it swung to the southerd fer some distance. Then it come back again, circled Jim's boat for a while and then vanished.

"Pop was flabbergasted.

"Tom Quibbs was dumbstruck.

"Jim held up a lantern, lit it and smiled.

"'Reckon I'll take thet there money, boys,' said Jim. 'Then I'll be goin' back to th' boat.'

"'But ain't ye afeerd to go back to yer boat?' asked Pop.

"'Oh, no,' said Jim, dry like.

"The money was paid over and Jim rowed over to his boat, which stood out black as charcoal against the inky sky.

"We raised sail an' beat it back to the Raunt.

"All Pop could say was 'Well, either Jim's in cahoots with th' devil or it's the ghost of a fish.'"

"Was it ever explained, Zeb?" asked the man from New York.

"Not for a long time; then Jim told me how he fooled the boys." Zeb puffed away.

"How was it done, Zeb?"

"Well, Jim, as I told you, had a highly trained gull—a gull black as the ace of spades. Jim took the skin of a weakfish and stretched it over a light wooden frame. Then he smeared it all over with phosphorus in addition to putting a small battery with tiny incandescent lights in it. These bulbs threw light right through the skin of the fish. A bit of mechanism made the fins and tail move, also the eyes revolve.

"When Jim rowed over to our boat that night he had turned on the battery lights, smeared the fish with fresh phosphorus and tied it to the legs of the gull. It was light and the gull had no trouble in flying around when Jim gave a peculiar signal. When Jim signalled that pet gull just flew up around and then back to behind the boat, where it hid itself until Jim released it.

"Some day I'll tell you how the gull got one of the biggest sharks ever hooked in Jamaica Bay. It's a real thriller, son."